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Tall Tale, Tall Talk: Pursuing the Lie in Jacksonian Literature

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There is only one world, and that world is false, cruel, contradictory, misleading, senseless. . . . We need lies to vanquish this reality, this 'truth,' we need lies *in order to live*. . . . That lying is a necessity of life is itself a part of the terrifying and problematic character of existence.—Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*

Whar thar ain't enuf feed, big childer roots littil childer outen the troff, an' gobbils up thar part.—Sut Lovingood (George Washington Harris)

WHAT IS A TALL TALE? And what is tall talk? A tall tale is a folk tale seized by the activity of tall talk and construed as a lie. Anyone who memorizes Vladimir Propp's thirty-one episodes can tell a folk tale, recite the legend of a hunt, but only a thinker who has contemplated the bloody hurt of that hunt, considered the pains of Time, Distance, and Dimension, and examined critically the way myth resolves them, can properly stretch a tale, derange its structural features, and expose its absurdity. Tall talk is thus at once a narrative skill and a philosophical stance. The teller unerringly bombards us with pertinent hyperbole, artfully digresses, *takes us in*, draws us into the field of deception, and makes us at last complicit. Whether in folklore or literature, the tall tale is never innocent, mythically immediate, but instead always begins as a subversion of the story. "This technique," Jorge Luis Borges asserts of Pierre Menard's precise and lunatic version of *Don Quixote*, "fills the most placid works with adventure."¹ When understood as a *humor*, a feeling about experience, and not seen as simply humorous, when it is truly "half horse, half alligator," the function of myth comically revealed, the tall tale is as sophisticated in its contrivance as the Borgesian fable.

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths, Selected Stories & Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York, 1964), p. 44.

It, too, freely restates *Quixote* and frankly attributes the *Imitatio Christi* to Louis Ferdinand Céline.

And yet because the tall tale enters American literature inside the genial anthropology of the sketch, a form designed to civilize the strange, this appearance and meaning is not always apparent. Did the writer who sent his sketches to William T. Porter's *Spirit of the Times* represent the "helliferocious" discourse of the tall tale as naively spoken, merely sketch it as humorous folklore, or did he realize the intelligence of tall talk, appropriate its energy, explode at once the tale and the sketch? We will look first at a section from Joseph G. Baldwin's *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi* (1853), at a text that can be called, accurately enough, a meta-tall tale, and then at perhaps the purest tale in the genre, Thomas B. Thorpe's "The Big Bear of Arkansas." Since the original relevance of the tale as told (perhaps) in the Mississippian wilderness or in a Georgian doggerly is beyond the text, irrevocable, we have only the reliable word of the humorist that such talkers did so speak the rough equivalent of what we read, and yet here it is sufficient because what we read is patently not an invention, but an understanding. Both texts reveal the rigorous logic of tall talk (a logic that would remorselessly expose Mark Twain's hostility in the Whittier Birthday Speech) and show the pressing force of cultural reference that informs the tall tale. Porter's engaging journal, which published these tales throughout the Jacksonian period (1831-1861), is indeed aptly named. Tall talk expresses the spirit of the times, but we have yet to appreciate fully the measure of its knowledge.

Who, then, talks in the tall tale? Who is the knower? Since Constance Rourke first described the tall talker in *American Humor, A Study of the National Character* (1931), as the "Gamecock of the Wilderness," a regional *Zeitgeist* who catches the ear of resident journalists and scribbling lawyers, most critics and scholars of the tall tale have rightly emphasized its artifice and stressed the politics of the humorist. Walter Blair's luminous essay on the subject in *Native American Humor* (1937), somewhat revised in 1960, establishes the systematic deployment of incongruity in the tale, while Kenneth S. Lynn's *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor* (1960) describes the appalled Whig sensibility of the humorist, describes him as effectively alienated from the Jacksonian world in which he lived. More recently James M. Cox has suggested that we set aside

the tall tale's mythic content and regard its true drama, "language in pursuit of nature."² These are all useful and provocative approaches to the tall tale, but finally it is the humorist himself who best characterizes his form and mode. In fact the humorists invariably anticipate Cox's position: they stress the mode of the tall tale, tall talk, not the *mythos*, the subject of the tall tale. "The humorous story [American] depends for its effect," Mark Twain writes in 1895, "upon the *manner* of the telling; the comic story [English] and the witty story [French] upon the *matter*."³ Mark Twain refers in this instance not to the tall tale, per se, but to what it had become after the Civil War, the anecdotal performance of touring literary comedians, and yet his emphasis on the "incongruities and absurdities" of the humorous story, on the way in which they are strung together "in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way,"⁴ speaks directly to the issue at hand. Baldwin's account of Ovid Bolus's tall tales in *Flush Times* describes essentially the same discursive manner:

When he [Bolus] was narrating, he put the facts in order, and seemed to speak them out of his memory; but not formally, or as if by rote. He would stop himself to correct a date; recollect he was wrong—he was *that* year at the White Sulphur or Saratoga, &c.: having got that date right, the names of the persons present would be incorrect, &c.: and these he corrected in turn. A stranger hearing him, would have feared the marring of a good story by too fastidious a conscientiousness in the narrator.⁵

It is here that we can begin. Bolus's "zeal in pursuit of a lie under difficulties," Baldwin tells us, "was remarkable" (*FT*, p. 16). This indeed is the activity of tall talk: the pursuit of a lie under difficulties. But the sketch which pursues this particular liar has its own difficulties. "And what history of that halcyon period," it bravely begins, "ranging from the year of Grace, 1835, to 1837; that golden era, when shin-plasters were the sole currency; when bank-bills were as 'thick as Autumn leaves in Vallambrosa,' and credit was a franchise,—what history of those times would be complete, that left out the name of Ovid Bolus" (*FT*, p. 1)? *Ovid Bolus*. Verbal excess

² James M. Cox, "Humor and America: The Southwestern Bear Hunt, Mrs. Stowe, and Mark Twain," *Sewanee Review*, LXXXIII (Fall, 1975), 586.

³ Mark Twain, "How To Tell A Story," in *Selected Shorter Writings of Mark Twain*, ed. Walter Blair (Boston, 1962), p. 239.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁵ Joseph G. Baldwin, *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi, A Series of Sketches* (Boston, 1853), p. 16. Subsequent references will be indicated *FT* in the text.

(hyperbole) and Gambling or Speculation, a throw of the dice (*bolus*), are conjoined in this surname. And yet Ovid, even among the pious in Alabama, is not a harshly pejorative name. The Ovid of the *Metamorphoses* is a soft, not a hard, liar. Baldwin evidently regards both Ovids, the reteller and twister of myths and the baroque frontier liar, with the same ambivalence. It is the artistry of Bolus that snares him, the rhapsodic spell of a passionately irresponsible discourse that takes doubt as a given and challenges it with the lie. Inevitably Baldwin makes a tall tale out of an attack on tall talk.

From the start he is seduced by the very thing he proscribes in this essay: flushed prose, flush times, the Jacksonian mistake, the lie. The nature of the lie is in fact Baldwin's major theme. Andrew Jackson removes the federal deposits from the United States Bank, distributes them in various state banks, and therein somehow breaks forever the periodic solidity, the careful balance, the centering designation of the Augustan sentence in America. In effect, somewhere between 1835 and 1837, Jackson creates Ovid Bolus, who is, allegorically speaking, the figure of Raw Inflation. Two values therefore organize the meaning of the sketch—Gold and Paper (shin-plasters), and their discrimination supposedly establishes the lie, reveals the perversion of Bolus's art. To Gold belongs prosaic truth, substantial fact, and the sign, *a dollar*; to Paper belongs poetic feigning, abstract idea, and the symbol, *the dollar*. So constructed, the essay easily follows the Whiggish judgment of Jacksonian politics, but this construction, as I have suggested, is disjointed by Baldwin's ambivalence, by his ability to state that socio-political difference in larger, less easy terms. How to distinguish (and believe) when the very field of significance, language itself, is in a paroxysm of upheaval, when *a dollar* will not pay in coin what it signifies it will pay, when this sign becomes a symbol (tacked to the masthead on Jackson's ship of state), and the sentence forgets its subject and mood, and merely unrolls in a riot of excited clauses (tall talk) through the territories?

If Baldwin's metaphors in this sketch are primarily the metaphors of a monetarist striving to free himself from the hideous fascination of flush times, his questions are finally those of a writer: *what has happened to discourse?* In *Nature* (1836) Ralph Waldo Emerson similarly contemplates the "prevalence of secondary desires" and wonders about the effect on language: "new imagery ceases to be

created, and old words are perverted to stand for things which are not: a paper currency is employed, when there is no bullion in the vaults.”⁶ For Baldwin, however, Emerson is a vivid part of the problem, not a suitable critic. Emersonian transcendentalism and Jacksonian speculation are powerfully linked in his mind; they are the two sides of a single shin-plaster, and in his description of Bolus devising a lie, Baldwin continually parodies the Emersonian text:

He had a great contempt for history and historians. He thought them tame and timid cobblers; mere tinkers on other people's wares,—simple parrots and magpies of other men's sayings or doings; borrowers of and acknowledged debtors for others' chattels, got without skill; they had no separate estate in their ideas: they were bailees of goods, which they did not pretend to hold by adverse title; buriers of talents in napkins making no usury; barren and unprofitable non-producers in the intellectual vineyard—*nati consumere fruges*. (*FT*, pp. 3–4)

In this wicked analogy (Bolus the entrepreneurial idealist), Baldwin pursues the same issue Herman Melville would examine in *The Confidence Man* (1857). Beware the alchemist who works his magic in language! As revealed in Bolus, the symbolic mode is simply an intellectualized version of tall talk, a denial of the specific and the real. Bolus “had long ceased to distinguish between the impressions made upon his mind by what came *from* it, and what came *to* it: all ideas were facts to him” (*FT*, p. 4). Transacted in Concord, this poetic commerce between the inner and outer world is perhaps achieved with some serenity, but in Alabama and Mississippi, in these territories where the ahistorical is not a concept but a dread, where no one is reliably named and known, it appears as a madness. Facts constitute the bullion in the vaults of language, proper words in proper places, the secure realm of the signified. When the fact is blurred, when Jackson smites the lexicon of gold, then the stable currency of terms in discourse, along with the value of *a dollar*, is lost, and Ovid Bolus, a genial predator in the field of meaning, is set loose. So, too, is *the dollar*. Like an Emersonian symbol, it becomes multivalent. Jacksonian inflation disrupts the harmony of traditional social values. Familial obligations are set aside, friendships broken, trusts voided (the scenarios of the literary Whigs are

⁶ *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, An Organic Anthology*, ed. Stephen Whicher (Boston, 1960), p. 33.

always dire); litigation becomes an event in everyday life. In the midst of the boom, this rush into the West, Baldwin had looked into the face of self-reliance and seen *laissez-faire*. He turns this recognition finally in upon the sign, *Charity*:

How well he asserted the Spiritual over the Material! How he delighted to turn an abstract idea to concrete cash—to make a few blots of ink, representing a little thought, turn out a labor-saving machine, and bring into his pocket money which many days of hard exhausting labor would not procure! What pious joy it gave him to see the days of the Good Samaritan return, and the hard hand of avarice relax its grasp on land and negroes, pork and clothes . . . blending in the act the three cardinal virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity: while, in the result, the chief of these three was *Charity*!

There was something sublime in the idea—this elevating the spirit of man to its true and primeval dominion over things of sense and grosser matter. (*FT*, p. 5)

Such charity, of course, is the meaningless bestowal of paper wealth, the giving of metaphorical riches. Without ever once being realized, property and commodities are freely and impalpably exchanged. The speculator deals in symbolic values (stock certificates) and speaks the poetic truth. Here is a world (Alabama and Mississippi) that proposes itself as a fortune, but as yet it is undeveloped, the “grosser matter” of undrained swamps and still-standing forests. So long as it is bought and sold, exchanged on paper, not worked, not developed, its wealth is paper, a “few blots of ink,” not gold—an idea, not a fact. This is the lie of flush times, the lie Bolus works upon.

Yet unlike Melville, who would ruthlessly explode that “something sublime” in language, Baldwin hesitates in his irony. Bolus is a confidence man whose motive is hard to determine, whose sense of himself as a liar is elusive. Indeed tall talk elevates the human to its “true and primeval dominion”—Mike Fink safely traverses wide distances in the wilderness, Davy Crockett slays the Behemoth, Emerson swims in the currents of Pure Being—and yet in the voice of Ovid Bolus there is always the predication of art, the beguiling sign that this discourse is aware of itself. If so, then Bolus does *not* confuse the impressions made upon his mind. His assertion of the Spiritual over the Material is not a naive exploitation of philosophical

idealism, but instead a sophisticated linguistic game played by a speaker who understands that words and things are only conveniently connected. "He was an Egotist," Baldwin tells us, "but a magnificent one: he was not a liar because an egotist, but an egotist because a liar. He usually made himself the hero of the romantic exploits and adventures he narrated; but this was not so much to exalt himself, as because it was more convenient to his art." And again: "He acted lies as well. Indeed, sometimes his very silence was a lie. He made nonentity fib for him . . ." (*FT*, p. 6). Yet tall talk so obviously tells this lie, this "lassoing a Camanche Chief, while galloping a stolen horse bare-backed, up the San Saba hills" (*FT*, p. 9), so easily creates the printing of spurious deeds—the lie of myth, the lie of paper, that we are left pondering Bolus's theatrical silences. If he stands apart from his lie, then what does he know about it, and how does that knowledge translate itself in the telling, in tall talk?

Except for several passages, we never hear Bolus speak in the sketch. There is only Baldwin's reading of tall talk, a reading that swerves nervously from the aesthetic to the political. The Panic of 1837, we ultimately learn, restores the significance of specie, ends the "second great experiment of independence: the experiment . . . of credit without capital, . . . enterprise without honesty" (*FT*, p. 81), and returns the United States to the rule of Poor Richard's "vulgar saws." Caught short, presumably in mid-sentence, Bolus decamps. All that is left of him is his signature on numerous notes and the resonance of his fictions. The sketch ends. But it is in this resonance, evoked and relished, that Baldwin begins the sketch, a dissertation on lying, and *Flush Times* itself. What did it mean to be a young lawyer in the Southwest when all the "old rules of business and the calculations of prudence were alike disregarded, and profligacy, in all departments of the *crimen falsi*, held riotous carnival" (*FT*, p. 85), when little boys, so Baldwin recalls in the sketch "How the Times Served the Virginians," would offer men ten dollars to hold them up so they could place their bets at the table of a faro-bank? One lived in the midst of the lie on credit. To refuse credit, suspend belief in the lie, "if the thing was ever done—were an insult for which a bowie-knife were not a too summary or exemplary means of redress" (*FT*, p. 83). It meant, in brief, cultural shock and a great flood of legal business. Which discourse, then, remained a stable representation of the real and enabled Baldwin to regard Bolus

humorously, which discourse continued to describe the hard metallic fact? The Virginians, aristocratic and literate, succumb to the allure of credit, the false language of paper, and are ruined in their uniquely grand style. Baldwin apparently did not lose his critical perspective. If only barely, the tall tale remains within the defining frame of the sketch.

As Perry Miller has shown in *The Life of the Mind in America*, a veritable combat of discourses and styles arose during the Jacksonian period in the legal profession, focused by the debate over the relevance of Common Law. Sheltered by the eminent commentaries of such legal theoreticians as James Kent and Joseph Story, conservative American lawyers sought to accommodate English law to the United States by "asserting the universal against the particular, the comprehensive rationality of traditional wisdom against the fiat of individual statute, the heritage of civilization against provincial barbarism."⁷ In *Flush Times* Baldwin takes great pains to justify "The Bar of the South West" precisely in those terms, an entire sketch is devoted to the task, but his allegiance to classical discourse, the language of Blackstone and Burke, is compromised. The Western lawyers he celebrates, men like Sergeant S. Prentiss, invariably appear as cultural schizophrenics. In their speech and personal style they are Byronic or Falstaffian (like Bolus), creatures of gorgeous excess, inveterate tall talkers, but in legal discourse, in court, they are scholarly rational students of Kent and Story, careful logicians. Prentiss's arguments "were clear, perspicuous and compact; the language simple and sententious" (*FT*, p. 210), but his oratory was "histrionic," his humor always moving toward the "coarse jest and Falstaffian extravagance" (*FT*, p. 200). This exemplary contradiction of mood evidently leaned heavily on their careers. For all his brilliance, Prentiss lacked "regular, self-denying application" and therefore "wasted and scattered" his considerable talent. Baldwin's belief in the ability of classical language to define and determine the nature of things, to interrogate and establish the fact, is at once everywhere stated and dismayed. It is from this rectitude, inside classical language, that he scorns the symbolic flights of the Emersonian imagination. And it is from this position, as a moralist, that he characterizes Bolusian lying as the epitome of Jacksonian speech.

⁷ Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America* (New York, 1956), p. 133.

And yet Baldwin loves these liars: Bolus “who would as soon lie for you as for himself” (*FT*, p. 24), and that great Kentuckian eater and drinker, Cave Burton, for whom a great man “was not so much shown by what he could do, as by what he could hold; not by what he left, but by what he consumed” (*FT*, p. 157). Much is made by way of fond allusion to Prince Hal and Falstaff in the text. But this affection is possible only because Baldwin contrives an implicit (and frail) distinction between their tall talk and the Jacksonian tall tale, the lie of Jackson the Hero who smashes the monopolists and liberates the development of the West.

As we have seen, Baldwin is brutally specific in attacking this lie. It is the felonious (symbolic) possession of Alabama and Mississippi by the dictate of paper that does such violence to the land, sends whole nations of Indians “howling into the Western wilderness to the friendly agency of some sheltering Suggs duly empowered to receive their coming annuities and back rations” (*FT*, p. 238), and opens a consternating chasm between what is and what is said. But tall talk, the pursuit of a lie under difficulties, is in some sense a commentary on this lie, a magnification of an already inflated tale. As Bolus told his stories, “he had need of some forbearance to withstand the interruptions and cross-examinations, with which his revelations were sometimes received” (*FT*, p. 16). That is, the teller and audience already know the ground of the tale, they understand that the tale is a lie, that what is given is a performance, improvised lying that holds a mirror up to their nature. We need lies to vanquish the cruel reality of existence, Nietzsche writes in *The Will to Power*, referring to theological and philosophical systems, to existential *angst*, and from this premise, in some such vein, the tall talker begins. What *was* the reach and range of man’s “true and primeval dominion” in the Southwest between 1835 and 1837? *Natur*, not Emersonian Nature, confronted the Jacksonian adventurer—the wall of the forest, the snaky turbulence of rivers—and it is this *Natur*, felt as a wound on the imagination, that lies within the spell of tall talk. The pilot sees the river, Mark Twain tells us in “Old Times on the Mississippi,” as the poet sees the river, but the pilot also see *the* river as it is: opposed, treacherous, antagonistic, a Force continually escaping the pilot’s attempt to interpret it. It is to such hard knowing looks, such mature readings of *Natur*, that tall talk confidently speaks.

More than any other Southwestern humorist, Baldwin describes the sociology of tall talk. In the work of his contemporaries, notably George Washington Harris, the “big skeers” of frontier life are openly stated (Sut Lovingood happily relates its horrors) and the interlocutor’s formal style is often itself parodied, but Baldwin alone attempts to comprehend the politics of tall talk, to link its monstrosities and exaggeration to the socio-economic phenomenon of Jacksonian inflation, and still retain an ear for its nuances. In *Flush Times*, particularly in the Bolus sketch, he slips easily into the rhythm of tall talk, modulating his hyperbole with deft paradoxical turns. It is assuredly an elegant version of tall talk, but the tone, one feels, is somehow right. His farewell to Bolus mockingly presents overstated learning in the manner of Washington Irving, the decorum of the sketch is sustained, and yet Bolus is gracefully placed near the site of one of his most cherished tall tales, the San Saba mountains. “Far away towards the setting sun he hied him,” Baldwin writes, “until, at last, with a hermit’s disgust at the degradation of the world, like Ignatius turned monk, he pitched his tabernacle amidst the smiling prairies that sleep in vernal beauty, in the shadow of the San Saba mountains. There let his mighty genius rest. It has earned repose. We leave Themistocles to his voluntary exile” (*FT*, p. 19). It is as though Baldwin discerns in Bolus the compelling presence of Mark Twain’s Colonel Sellers, and beyond him, incarnate, the rich round being of W. C. Fields; as though, in short, he recognizes in tall talk a consciousness that transcends the lie. *In the shadow of the San Saba mountains*. There are kindred spirits in this misty place: the aforesaid Colonel Sellers, W. C. Fields, and undoubtedly the Wizard of Oz—confidence men, gilders of the fact. Baldwin, it might be said, has as clear a grasp of this character, this voice, as Mark Twain, William Claude Dukinfield, and L. Frank Baum had of their creations, a conception that is wary. What is constrained in this character is the nihilistic tendency Melville released in his portrayal of the cosmopolitan in *The Confidence Man*. When it is aware, hyperbole is necessarily ironic. To this dire extent in his dissertation on lying, Baldwin did not wish to go. He strives to reassert verities in *Flush Times*, not explode them. His task, then, is not to become Bolus, the cunning liar Melville becomes in his fiction, but to keep tall talk properly regarded in the clarifying system of gold and paper, the true and the false.

In any event, Bolus's tall talk is spoken inside the syntax and diction of polite discourse. His lies are practiced; they are routines carefully rehearsed and skillfully presented. In Harris's tales, tall talk is obscenely aggressive, employed at times like a bludgeon on the composure of the literate. Bolus speaks slyly to us, trapping us in a shared deceit. Sut Lovingood speaks at us. In one sketch Sut travels north to New York, beats up an effeminate dandy, breaks into a school, fights with the "perlice," and menaces a Northern radical—all this literally in one spilling sentence. He relates a newspaper account of his visit in which it is observed

that I'd be wuf a great deal, tu tote expresses an' steal niggers, ef I only wer tamed ('speck I would, but *who's in New York tu tame me?*); sed he wer onable to get a satisfying inspeckshun ove me, owin' to my vicious natur; that he'd tu withdraw cautiously, for the wild beast perdominated tu much in my cross; but take me all tugether, I wer a livin' sample ove human progress an' free love atween a kangaroo an' a mowin' mershean, an' he thought much mout be done in that way; calls on Misses Branch tu try a few small 'speriments with a steam rock drill, while he pratzizes a while on a thirty ton locomotive, an' specks the consekenses will 'stonish the world.⁸

Thorpe's "The Big Bear of Arkansas" poetically modulates these linguistic extremes in the Southwestern sketch without losing the sharpness of their conflict. Here the teller of the tall tale speaks in his own voice, but without Sut's violence, and the writer who looks with Baldwinian bemusement on the native speaker is at length baffled. Thorpe's sketch was regarded in its own time as a masterpiece in the genre, and deservedly so. An adept portrait painter and an equally facile writer who wrote for both the rowdy *Spirit of the Times* and Lewis Gaylord Clark's urbane *Knickerbocker Magazine*, Thorpe brought to the sketch not only a practiced skill in both voices, but a painterly appreciation of the structure of the form in which he worked, an artist's sense of how a convention can be turned. The tale Thorpe tells us, Richard Dorson observes, "is no folktale, but a literary invention. Jim Doggett's elaborate narrative has no counterparts among our thousands of field-collected texts, although curiously it shows some parallelism with Beowulf."⁹ But

⁸ George Washington Harris, *Sut Lovingood's Yarns*, ed. M. Thomas Inge (New Haven, Conn., 1966), p. 228.

⁹ Richard Dorson, "The Identification of Folklore in American Literature," *Journal of American Folklore*, LXX (Jan.-March, 1957), 7-8.

if Thorpe invents this tale, it is not to revive Beowulf in buckskin. A tall tale is a folk tale seized by the activity of tall talk and construed as a lie. "The author behind the story," James M. Cox suggests, "is in effect putting on both languages—inventing something out of what may very well be nothing."¹⁰ In Cox's provocative reading of "The Big Bear of Arkansas," both the narrator and the native speaker understand the meaning and the course of the tale. They are, as it were, collaborators in a joke that presumably bursts in the face of the mythologist. Indeed Doggett's tall talk stridently tells us that something is herein hidden, reversed, that it pursues a lie and fails to catch it, but the joke that finally breaks, like the toppled ponderous turkey, spills much more than just hollow laughter, the knowledge that "there is, or should be, *nothing* to the bear story;"¹¹ it eviscerates and empties a significant cultural myth. Along with Bolus's lies, the bear story belongs to the history of flush times. How is this expressed, and what is the lie revealed in "The Big Bear of Arkansas?"

We confront at first the *Invincible*, a "high-pressure-and-beat-everything" steamboat plying the Mississippi. "Here may be seen, jostling together, the wealthy Southern planter and the pedler of tin-ware from New England—the Northern merchant and the Southern jockey—a venerable bishop, and a desperate gambler—the land speculator and the honest farmer—professional men of all creeds and characters—Wolvereens, Suckers, Hoosiers, Buckeyes, and Corncrackers, beside a 'plentiful sprinkling' of the half-horse and half-alligator species of men, who are peculiar to 'old Mississippi,' and who appear to gain a livelihood by simply going up and down the river."¹² In effect this ship, like the *Pequod* and her sister-ship, the *Fidèle*, is the world, the Jacksonian world: explosively active, diverse in its "species of men," and jostling, jostling—not comingled. The narrator is the familiar "man of observation" prosperous enough to take the journey for "pleasure or business," clever enough "to read the great book of character so favorably opened before him," and sufficiently learned to speak to us so urbanely. Into the quiet drift of his meditation breaks the raucous shout: "Hurra

¹⁰ Cox, "Humor and America," p. 587.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Thomas Bangs Thorpe, "The Big Bear of Arkansas," in *Humor of the Old Southwest*, ed., Hennig Cohen and William B. Dillingham (Boston, 1964), p. 268. Subsequent references will be indicated *BB* in the text.

for the Big Bear of Arkansas" (BB, pp. 268–269)! The tall tale is thus conventionally framed. A native speaker appears to tell his tale within the genial gaze of a literary observer. The two discourses are juxtaposed. But in this sketch the supervening writer of tall talk, the author who manipulates both discourses, unconventionally leaves his signature. So deftly done is this act, so quick the authorial glance up through the text, that it is easily missed. Doggett tells two tales, one to the assembly at large and the other primarily to the "man of observation." Their difference, as we shall see, is important. Between their narration the gentleman pauses (like Baldwin, pleased to show us the mode of tall talk) and invites us to consider Doggett's style. "His manner was so singular, that half of his story consisted in his excellent way of telling it, the great peculiarity of which was, the happy manner he had of emphasizing the prominent parts of his conversation. As near as I can recollect, I have italicized the words, and given the story in his own way" (BB, p. 274). Note particularly, Thorpe insists, the "peculiarity" of the "prominent parts . . . I have italicized." And indeed if we isolate these parts, give them their own seriality, we see the truth the lie of tall talk rambles around: *the* river, *Natur*, fear and trembling. "The Big Bear of Arkansas" is about the successful kill of a creation bear, the taming of the wilderness, it is told on the ship *Invincible*, and yet the sketch is structured, through a system of ironic reversals, to reveal anxiety and defeat.

As Doggett first appears in the ship's cabin, regaling his fellow passengers, he seems the very soul of authenticity. His "perfect confidence in himself was irresistibly droll" (BB, p. 269). He describes hyperbolically the fabulous wealth of Arkansas, a state "where the sile runs down to the centre of the 'arth" (BB, p. 270), where "forty-pound" turkeys are so fat they can't fly far, and crops come up "*spontenacious*," potatoes and beets standing like timber. But the italicized parts in this section constitute a counter-text, and in this text Doggett has all the bad faith of Sartre's waiter. He is aware of the bemused suspicion of the "perlite chaps." His praise of Arkansas barely conceals its terrors. The Hoosier, for example, knows about the mosquitoes in Arkansas, knows about its malarial swamps, and it is with these "difficulties" that Doggett must contend. "Well, stranger, except them"; he protests, "for it ar a fact that they are rather *enormous*, and do push themselves in somewhat troublesome" (BB, p. 270). Tall talk converts this troublesome fact. "But mosqui-

toes is natur, and I never find fault with her. If they ar large, Arkansaw is large, her varmints ar large, her trees ar large, her rivers ar large, and a small mosquito would be of no more use in Arkansaw that preaching in a cane-brake" (*BB*, p. 271). His italicized voice, however, speaks in a different, less confident tone. He has never made *the first visit before* to New Orleans, he has been called *green*, *but I arn't so at home*. It is the "perlite chaps" who are the *real know-nothings*, who do not know the difference between *game* and *meat*. These terms and phrases, threaded through his discourse, lead finally to this distinction: *game* and *meat*. People who live in cities eat the trash of small dung-picking fowl as game, "chippen-birds and shite-pokes," but "*how we got our meat* in Arkansaw" (*BB*, p. 270), that indeed is a different story. It is an aggressive distinction, Doggett strikes back like Sut at the citybred who patronize him, but this separation of diet, while it reflects the difference between rude westerners and "perlite chaps," also refers to a profound enigma felt by Doggett himself.

This enigma is posed by the nature of the *sile* in Arkansas. Doggett's tall talk in these early anecdotes about life in the "creation State" sets forth a remarkable paradox, a reversal of the ordinary conception of how food is gained: Agriculture (the tame) is dangerous, Hunting (the wild) is safe. For the *sile* is so *spontenacious* in its fecundity, so spontaneous, so tenacious (Doggett's neologism is striking), that ultimately "*it can't be cleared*" (*BB*, p. 273). Cultivation is hard and unrewarding. In its creation state, the wild earth does not readily feed men the domesticated food of cereal crops, but it will yield meat to the hunter. That is, the *sile* compels men to live like savages in Arkansas. It is this obstinate, bizarre, decivilizing *sile* that confronts the white man in the wilderness, that makes it a place of pain, and Doggett's tall talk, which praises the *sile* so highly, merely discloses the truth of his own failure. He may call the cedar stumps and Indian mounds that clog and rumple his land gigantic beets and potatoes, but all the same the farmer is inevitably ruined and goes hungry. And while he does so, the river makes a "great improvement" on his land, sweeps away an acre or two, and places his cabin on the perilous edge of the river—"a great advantage in wet weather, I assure you, as you can now roll a barrel of whiskey into my yard in high water from a boat, as easy as falling off a log" (*BB*, pp. 272–273). The joke is bitter. In its context Doggett's sum-

mary is apt: “*and planting in Arkansaw is dangerous*” (BB, p. 273). But how, then, does one survive in the creation state, this wild overgrown paradise? How does he retain his humanity? And what does he eat?

I had a good-sized sow killed in that same bottom land. The old thief stole an ear of corn, and took it down to eat where she slept at night. Well, she left a grain or two on the ground, and lay down on them: before morning the corn shot up, and the percussion killed her dead. I don’t plant any more: natur intended Arkansaw for a hunting ground, and I go according to natur. (BB, p. 273)

How we got our meat is the substance of the second tale which deals with the hunt. Here the reversal implicit in the first session of tall talk is once again turned, reversed, and in this reversal the white man in the wilderness, now a hunter, is stripped bare of the dignity of his manhood. Hunting is *not* easy or safe. No mode of existence in Arkansas, the creation state, successfully comprehends the overwhelming power of its *Natur*, its stark otherness. For the hunter who is beguiled by the ease with which he becomes an “*epidemic among bears*” has yet to learn what the farmer already knows from his perspective: that this astonishing *sile*, if not carefully watched, will strike and kill. To the hunter who has forgotten this lesson, who has indeed begun to strut in the woods, a mysterious “creation bear” suddenly appears. He is a large spectral eminence whose claw-marks on the sassafras trees are the writ of his divinity. The hunter hunts him with increasing desperation (he gets smaller as the bear grows larger), and then, after some difficulties, the bear dies. These difficulties are the compressive force operating on the tall talk in the tale, this story which draws the urbane narrator into its confusion. The italicized parts of the narrative represent a shorthand version of the tale and indicate, as in the first section, the stresses that play upon Doggett’s telling. Their emphasis, moreover, underlines the five crucial events in which the hunter is at first punished and then humiliated. In the initial sequence Doggett’s boast frames his adventure; in the second he becomes the hunted; in the third his weapon fails, he has misfired at the wrong bear; in the fourth the bear comes in to die; and in the last Doggett draws his rueful conclusion.

| 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---------------------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| <i>I am numerous</i> | <i>the bear</i> | <i>wrath all over</i> |
| <i>none excepted</i> | <i>bear and buzzard</i> | <i>If my gun did not snap</i> |
| <i>particular bear</i> | <i>out of pork</i> | <i>it snapped</i> |
| <i>hunt</i> | <i>he hunted me</i> | <i>lining of my coat</i> |
| <i>Stranger, I'm certain</i> | | <i>she bear, and not the old</i> |
| <i>I knew the thing lived</i> | | <i>critter after all</i> |
| | | <i>for fear of the lining</i> |
| 4 | 5 | |
| <i>THAT BEAR</i> | <i>bedspread of his skin</i> | |
| <i>over that fence</i> | <i>missed him</i> | |
| <i>black mist</i> | <i>unhunting bear, and died when his time come</i> | |
| <i>walked through the fence</i> | | |

The poignance of Doggett's tall talk emerges through the simplicity of these crude fragmented utterances—this is the stammering, the fearful hesitation, concealed by the hunter's boast: "A bear is started, and then he is killed" (*BB*, p. 275). Not this bear. Instead the question quickly becomes who is going to be eaten, the hunter or the hunted, who is going to be violated. As a killer of bears, Doggett has struck back at the perverse monstrosity of the *sile*, asserted his "true and primeval dominion" over feminine *Natur*, but when "*the bear*" rises like a "*black mist*" from the *sile* to elude his rifle and mock his skill, Doggett is effectively returned once more to the helpless incompetence of the farmer. His neighbors deride him. He begins to waste away. When the bear at length consents to become a bedspread, to give Doggett his meat, the moment it chooses to do so, and the way it chooses to die, declare its unsubdued mastery. In the woods near his house, after breakfast, Doggett crouches, pants down, to defecate. It is then that the bear as a *black mist* walks through the fence, *arrives*, and in scrambling to shoot merely to protect his life, Doggett slips into his ordure. Only then, besmirched, does he ostensibly bring down the bear. The disgrace of this kill, moreover, recalls an earlier disgrace, Dog-

gett's first encounter with what he thinks is the creation bear. In this passage, the third sequence, the bear is treed, but Doggett's rifle misfires, snaps, and in his excitement he fails to find new caps. They have curiously vanished into the lining of his coat. While he struggles to regain the use of his piece, so to speak, the bear escapes, pursued by the dogs, and is finally brought down by them in a lake. When Doggett retrieves the carcass, he discovers to his surprise a "*she bear, and not the old critter after all*" (BB, p. 278). In both instances as he strives to dominate *the bear*, when he comes face to face with it, Doggett is reduced to an infantile state: he is impotent, he falls down in his mire. This can perhaps be put another way—the hunter *discovers* his infantile state in the forest. For the crude jokes in Doggett's narrative reveal, above all, his ignorance, his spiritual and moral blindness to the meaning of his experience. His failure is exemplary. The insult of the bear's death is *Natur's* riposte to the brag of the hunter. What we see in Doggett's humiliation (which is unmistakably set forth in sexual terms) is the frustration of the white man in the wilderness, his inability to achieve an honorable *modus vivendi* in the creation state. As Thorpe wrote this sketch, Americans had already created the tall tale of flush times, ransacked and pillaged the Ohio River Valley and the Southwestern territories, and were reaching even farther westward to determine their manifest destiny. Obsessed by the formidable image of the bear, the Old Man of the Woods, tellers of tall tales counted the cost in their own terms.

Doggett's tall tale, which begins so promisingly with "an idea of a hunt in which the greatest bear was killed that ever lived" (BB, p. 274), never attains the stature of myth. It does not reconcile or mediate the rupture of his experience in this hunt. Instead the tale's tallness collapses at last into puzzled ambiguity. "But, stranger, I never liked the way I hunted him, *and missed him*," Doggett confesses. "There is something curious about it, that I could never understand,—and I never was satisfied at his giving in *so easy at last*" (BB, p. 279). The sacred bear thus becomes a bedspread. Here, obscurely disturbed by what he has heard, the narrator observes that this "mystery" evidently made a "strong impression" on the hunter's mind. "It was also evident," he continues, looking himself for the resolution of the tale, "that there was some superstitious awe connected with the affair,—a feeling common with all 'children of the

wood' when they meet with anything out of their every-day experience" (*BB*, p. 279). What lurks behind Doggett's confusion and the narrator's evasion is the shadowy form of the myth that tall talk disfigures. The coming of the Buffalo-Woman in Sioux legend, as Black Elk tells it, brings to the Sioux their identity as a tribe. She endows them with ritual, teaches them how to kill buffalo without defiling the spirit of *the buffalo*. Such a conception of *the bear* never occurs to Doggett. And yet the question proposed in the Sioux myth is precisely the question posed in "The Big Bear of Arkansas." How will we live in this place? What is our relationship to the *sile*? When Doggett beholds the "fresh marks on the sassafras trees" (*BB*, p. 275) cut into the bark so high as to speak the supernatural, he responds: "Says I, 'Here is something a-purpose for me: that bear is mine, or I give up the hunting business'" (*BB*, p. 275). Black Elk tells essentially the same story, but to a different end. Two scouts looking for bison see a woman in the distance who slowly advances toward them. Immediately one of the scouts has "bad thoughts" about this woman. He wishes to possess her and does not heed the warning of his comrade.

When she came still closer, they saw that she wore a fine white buckskin dress, that her hair was very long and that she was young and very beautiful. And she knew their thoughts and said in a voice that was like singing: 'You do not know me, but if you want to do as you think, you may come.' And the foolish one went; but just as he stood before her, there was a white cloud that came and covered them. And the beautiful young woman came out of the cloud, and when it blew away the foolish man was a skeleton covered with worms.¹³

The sentence passed in this *mythos* on the bad hunter is not, of course, the judgment that falls upon the white hunter. It is a black mist that surrounds Doggett and he is left to tell his tale. But he is nonetheless disfigured. "Hurra for the Big Bear of Arkansas!" So the sketch begins. Doggett (who is merely dogged) has appropriated the mythic identity of the creation bear. He has become, Indian-fashion, the Big Bear. But as the tale demonstrates, this adopted name is a craven theft. Doggett's act is a poor impersonation, a lie. It is here presumably that the narrator becomes uneasy, not because

¹³ *Black Elk Speaks, Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux, as told through John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln, 1961), p. 3.

he knows the mythic verities of Indian legend, but because the jagged edge of Doggett's broken tale cuts violently into the literary myth he would know and cherish. "I never liked the way I hunted him, *and missed him*." In effect, Doggett is Natty Bumppo's dark double, the Natty who misses and therefore can never undergo heroic metamorphosis. There are no rites of passage among these intimidating trees. The narrator has picked up all the stresses indicated by Doggett in his telling and vaguely perceived their drift. His condescending phrase, *children of the wood*, thus marks his tardy attempt to distance himself from Doggett's debasement. And yet it is ironically true: Doggett *is* a child in the woods, not a man. The narrator's first observation of Doggett, which establishes him as a fine specimen of the frontiersman, "a man enjoying perfect health and contentment . . . good-natured to simplicity" (*BB*, p. 269), is overturned. There is a long silence at the end of the tale, everyone just sits there, and then Doggett abruptly suggests a drink. This drinking, the narrator remarks, is "a thing which he did . . . evidently to his heart's content" (*BB*, p. 279). And with this last dubious piece of evidence, the sketch also concludes.

Such lucidity, it must be said, does not exist in Thorpe's other sketches. There the conventions of the form are scrupulously respected. Mike Fink is as strong as Hercules, the frontiersman lavishly praised for his self-reliance, dialect proffered as curiosity, but Thorpe's general fidelity to the requirements of the sketch should not distract us from the strengths of "The Big Bear of Arkansas" and what it tells us about tall talk. In fact, the writings of all the notable humorists in this genre are, to use Sut's phrase, "mix'd dam permiskusly." There is much that is second-rate, and even more that is fifth-rate, merely ephemeral. Harris's *Sut Lovingood's Yarns* (1867) is perhaps the best extended example of what is brilliant and insufferably tedious in Southwestern humor.

In any event, this tradition brings colloquial speech, boxed, into American literature. And in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, as everyone knows, Mark Twain releases that speech from the box. It is the only discourse in the text. Because of this achievement, the sketch in Southwestern humor is often regarded only as an anticipation, a precursive form happily filled with racy folklore. It is as though Harris, Baldwin, Thorpe, *et al*, were gradually and collectively dreaming themselves into Samuel Langhorne Clemens. When

placed in their own context, however, another sense of their work appears. Even in the orthographical jungle of Sut Lovingood's snarling speech, colloquial discourse exists as a language spoken with knowledge and filled with meaning, a discourse speaking the world. It is not merely an exotic feature of language, dialect as eccentricity;—the rustic drawl of Mortimer Snerd playing straight-man to the dapper Charlie McCarthy. Tall talk, moreover, not only speaks in the flying of backwoodsmen; it is as well the chosen address of Ovid Bolus and Jim Doggett's narrative mode. That is, tall talk can curl sinuously in formal discourse, turn it with ease toward the absurd, and in its rough version, speaking through Doggetts and Lovin-goods, work the sentence and its spelling fluently against the dictates of the grammarians (Goold Brown, Samuel Kirkham, *et al*) who dominated the American curriculum, always specifying (uncategorically) the metonymical thingness of the perceived world. This indeed is what provokes Baldwin in *Flush Times*—the expansive potency of tall talk. If tall talk could describe the world, see it as Sut sees it, then it could also speak about language; it could turn back on itself and become an ironic attitude, Melville's stance in *The Confidence Man*. Bolus does not distinguish facts and ideas, words and things, and what shimmers in this bright lunacy is the conviction that nothing is true, everything possible, and language itself only a play with symbols. When there is no bullion in the bank, a paper currency is employed. Emerson's remark is so variously stated in his generation, so deeply felt, that Jackson's assault on the United States Bank indeed seems the decisive historical event Baldwin makes it in *Flush Times*—the emptying of classical discourse, the end of the Golden Age.

The silence that falls at the end of "The Big Bear of Arkansas" is shrouded by the black mist Doggett's tall talk divulges. Everywhere one looks in Jacksonian literature, which thrives on hoaxes, tall tales, accusations of plagiarism, and the rolling orotund Websterian period, this mist is present. The other world from which the creation bear mysteriously emerges to write on the tree: *I am here*, is the same shrouded world into which Pym, the Jacksonian entrepreneur, at length drifts, the white (or black) world of silence. The world that lies on the far side of the paper currency of language. The Not-Me. It is into that space that Pip also sinks in *Moby Dick* and then returns, speaking strangely. Jackson's redistribution of the

federal deposits in 1832 threw open the public lands (between 1834 and 1836 government sales of such land rose from 4,000,000 to 20,000,000 acres) and brought to bay Jacksonian *Natur*—the great whale's marbled body, the warm living *sile* of Arkansaw. Tall talkers were those who had drowned, Pipwise, in that *sile*, who had moved into its fastness like Pym, and their speech, whether polished or rude, reflects their alienation, their secret knowledge of what is and what is said.